

John F. Kennedy
December 29, 1962
Staff meeting
Ind
Local
File

December 29, 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

I have recently had a letter from Trumbull Higgins, an historian who specializes in the area where military and political factors intersect in major decisions. He writes as follows:

"As a consequence of the domestic political repercussions of the more or less endemic Cuban crisis, I am taking the liberty of suggesting that consideration be given to the prompt preparation of a serious and official history of this problem. Whether such a history should be declassified, in whole or in part, in order to head off partisan political criticism is immaterial; its value to the officials concerned should be self-evident.

"Since my background, both with the Institute for Defense Analyses and in private scholarship (currently I am completing my fourth book on the problems of contemporary coalition warfare, namely Hitler's campaign in Russia, while teaching at Hunter College in New York City), might seem to qualify me particularly well for such a task, I am offering my services in such an endeavor. Perhaps the Institute would be the best semi-governmental organization to carry such a project through."

I know Higgins slightly; he is an old friend of Mary Meyer's, who knows him better. His previous books are Winston Churchill and the Second Front, 1940-1943 (Oxford University Press, 1957), and Korea and the Fall of MacArthur (Oxford University Press, 1960). Both are brilliant, trenchant, somewhat unconventional essays in

politico-military history. He is, I think, a careful and scrupulous historian, but also has considerable independence of mind. Anything he wrote would not be dull official history; but it would be penetrating and probably illuminating.

Higgins's proposal raises a general question: should we not make an effort to write up the crises of the Administration, if only for the files, before memories fade and everyone gets absorbed in something else? Obviously no one regularly employed around the White House has time for such historical labors. I wonder therefore whether it might not be a good idea to bring in qualified persons to write ad hoc accounts of major episodes. I wish, for example, we had done this in the weeks after the U. S. Steel controversy. If we do not begin a program of this sort, we run the risk of not having coherent accounts of the major events of these years -- and files, diaries and recollections are likely to be far less satisfactory sources for the future historian than an independent survey made soon after the event.

If we were to undertake such a program, there would still be the question whether we would want careful, factual chronicles or interpretative essays. I would think it best to strike for a combination -- that is, to commission people to collect and write up the facts but not to refrain from interpretation and generalization.

I am sending copies of this memorandum to Mac and Ted. I do think we ought to work out some way of establishing the historical record in a manner which would distract busy officials as little as possible from the problems of the present and the future.

Scotty Reston's column in the Post-Dispatch of December 28 is relevant.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

cc: Mr. Bundy
Mr. Sorensen

Ed

FRIDAY DECEMBER 28, 1962

Kennedy Administration Makes An Unusual Amount of History But Keeps a Poor Record of It

Its Big Decisions Are Often Taken In Small Private Meetings, Usually Without the Benefit of Any Chronological Account of What Happened.

By JAMES RESTON

C 1962, New York Times News Service

WASHINGTON, Dec. 28.

EVERY AMERICAN ADMINISTRATION makes more history than it preserves, but the Kennedy Administration has made more history in 1962 and kept less than any other since the exciting

This is both a pity and a mystery. No administration since Roosevelt's and maybe even since Wilson's has been more conscious of history or more competent to write it, but the record is being poorly kept.

President Kennedy said the other day to Chancellor Adenauer of West Germany that we were possibly "at an important turning point in the history of the relations between East and West." Later, in his television review of his first two years in office, he referred to the combination of United States and Soviet power in Cuba and the conflict between Soviet and Chinese ideologies as "a climactic period."

Carly P. Haskins, the reflective president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, has suggested that we may be living in one of the historic "Old Ages of history, comparable to the days of Periclean Athens, the early days of

the President himself is conscious of this problem, and is always promising to spend a quiet evening at home with a dictaphone, but until somebody invents the 48-hour day, this is not likely to happen. Therefore, the only hope is not to burden the President but to draft some trusted aid to serve as recorder.

Otherwise, even if the nation is ignored, what will the President himself do after Jan. 20, 1969? By that time several other things will have happened, some of them no doubt of historical interest, and he will be out of a job. Then he will be 51, too old for touch football, but just right for writing history. Notes at that time will be useful, for Churchill demonstrated, the way to be sure of your

DETERIORATING ORIGINAL XEROXED BY THE
KENNEDY LIBRARY

The consensus of history seems to be coming to where "the record is being greatly kept." President Kennedy said the other day in Berkeley, Accuser of West Germany that we were possibly "in an important turning point in the history of the relations between East and West." Later, in his television review of his first two years in office, he referred to the re-orientation of United States and world power in Cuba and the conflict between Soviet and Chinese ideologies as "a climactic period."

Cary P. Haskins, the celebrated resident of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, has also suggested that we may be living in one of the historic Golden Ages of history, comparable to the days of Pericles.

and the friend of
charitable accomplishment
in each an unusual degree.
Social and political stability
has been attained, at least
at home. Yet the threat
of violence and social disorganiza-
tion can never have been so
great as now.

men know that they lived in interesting and dangerous. But the era of the enigma has been replaced by the era of the enigma itself. The enigma is up with the letter of history and maybe it is not even at the President's own less sweeping estimate, the era is better than the official recording of its secrets.

The big decisions of this Administration are often taken in small private meetings, usually without the benefit of any chronological account of what happened. A record is kept of the Cabinet meetings but the Cabinet seldom meets. The National Security Council meets more often and again its recommendations are recorded, but it meets on the whim of the President and sometimes it is convened to discuss great decisions, sometimes it meets merely to be told what has happened in small unrecorded sessions, and sometimes it does not meet at all.

THIS CONFORMS to President Kennedy's style. He hates charades around long tables. He turned over the preliminary analysis of the last Cuba crisis to an ad hoc group of Cabinet and sub-Cabinet officials who were chosen partly on the ground that they

it is now in the possession of
Charles Charles, Esq., with Henry
L. Stetson.

The President himself is conscious of the problem, and I always recommend to people a certain amount of honest vice as discipline, but until something happens the situation is that not likely to happen. There is the only hope is not to trust the President but to find some trusted & to serve's record.

Of course even if the war is declared, what will the President have to do after Jan. 20, 1973? By that time several other things will have happened, some of them no doubt of historical interest and he will be out of a job. Then he will be 31, too young for retirement and too old for teach football, but just right for writing history. Books at that time will be useful, for Churchill demonstrated, the way to be sure of your place in history is to write it

been attained, - at home and abroad - at home. Yet the threat of violence and social disorganization can never have been so great.

Men know that they live in a world of real danger. But they forget that the government's chief task is to keep them safe. This year, we will get us up with the President's budget and maybe this year, like last year or the year before, an even more sweeping estimate the era is better than the official recording of its secrets.

The big decisions of this Administration are often taken in small private meetings, usually without the benefit of any chronological account of what happened. A record is kept of the cabinet meetings but the Cabinet seldom meets. The National Security Council meets more often and again its recommendations are recorded, but it meets on the whim of the President and sometimes it is convened to discuss great decisions, sometimes it meets merely to be told what has happened in small unrecorded sessions, and sometimes it does not meet at all.

THIS CONFORMS to President Kennedy's style. He hates chairing around long tables. He turned over the preliminary analysis of the last Cuba crisis to an ad hoc group of Cabinet and inter-Cabinet officials who were chosen partly on the ground that they could keep secrets. He likes the human race in small doses, and is constantly summoning people to his office in ones or pairs for talks that often lead directly to major decisions.

This, of course, is his privilege. It could be argued that, until John Kennedy entered the White House, the American Government was slowly being choked to death by red tape emanating from countless talkative committees. Yet the nation has its rights too. It is entitled to the memories of its servants, for memory is the raw material of history and tradition.

1962 illustrates the point. Not only East-West relations, but civil relations, and federal-state relations, and federal-business relations all reached a point of crisis this year—usually in some private talk with Andre Gromyko, or Gov. Ross Barnett, or Roger Blough in the White House. What did happen in the Blough-Kennedy meeting in the steel mills? We do not know, and what is more important, no official record was kept. And what about Ross Barnett? For all we know, Robert Kennedy took Mississippi on the telephone.